

Policy brief; Sustainable development and key implementation challenges in Bangladesh

June Pickering

Figure of contents

1. Executive summary
2. Figures
3. Background
4. Major sustainable development issues
 - 4.1. Poverty and inequality Bangladesh Journal of Sociology
 - 4.2. Climate change and environmental degradation
 - 4.3. Healthcare and education
5. Challenges of implementation
 - 5.1. Governance, institutions, and environmental education
 - 5.2. Infrastructure
 - 5.3. Population and urbanisation
6. Conclusion and recommendations
7. References

1. Executive summary

As a densely populated and climate-vulnerable nation in South Asia, Bangladesh faces numerous obstacles as it aims achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This brief will analyse the key challenges in the implementation of sustainable development in Bangladesh and firstly provide a geographical, social, and economic overview of the country, secondly, discuss the major sustainable development issues that Bangladesh faces including poverty and inequality, climate change and environmental degradation as well as urbanisation and education and thirdly, explore the key challenges involved in any implementation with a focus on governance and social inequality,

infrastructure and resources as well as urbanisation and resource scarcity. The brief will finally conclude with recommendations and observations.

2. Figures and tables

Figure 3.0 Top twenty countries by population

Figure 3.1 Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate in Bangladesh 2008 - 2018

Figure 3.3 Global gender gap index 2022, Southeast Asia

Figure 4.1 Leading weather, water, and climate changes disasters between 1970 and 2019

Figure 5.0 Population growth of Bangladesh from 2012 to 2022 compared with previous year

Figure 5.1 Population density of Bangladesh from 2005 to 2020

Figure 5.2 Bangladesh: Urbanisation from 2012 to 2022

Table 5.1 SDG implementation and programmes of Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh by indicator

3. Background

Situated in South Asia sharing land borders with India and Myanmar and a coastline along the Bay of Bengal, the People's Republic of Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated and the eighth most populous country globally (see Figure 3.0) with a population of 170 million in an area of 148,000 square kilometres. Vulnerable to climate change, Bangladesh has a tropical climate and humid monsoon season and experiences floods, cyclones, tornadoes, and tidal bores on an almost annual basis as well as significant environmental degradation involving soil, deforestation and erosion with the related negative impacts on agriculture, water and food security, health, and shelter.

The second largest economy in South Asia after India, Bangladesh was the second poorest country in the world when it gained independence in 1971 with over 80% of the population living below the poverty line, however, as the result of economic reforms in the 1990s and accelerated economic growth, Bangladesh is a fast-growing economy with per capita income increasing by 149% between 2008 and 2018 as seen in Figure 3.1 below (World Bank, 2023). In addition, the female

labour force participation rate has increased by 45% with the World Economic Forum ranking Bangladesh as the most gender-equal nation in South Asia in 2022 as illustrated in Figure 3. 3. Nevertheless, according to Sadekin et al (2021), despite sustained economic growth and cultural and social achievements, poverty and income inequality still pose a serious challenge to the economy in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, given its diverse ecosystem and favourable climate and soil conditions to produce multiple crops as well as a large labour force, opportunities for crop intensification and diversification have become a point of comparative advantage for Bangladesh. Indeed, the agriculture sector in Bangladesh has transformed since 1971 and seen a dramatic increase in agricultural production due to technological innovations and changes in diets largely driven by urbanisation and globalisation.

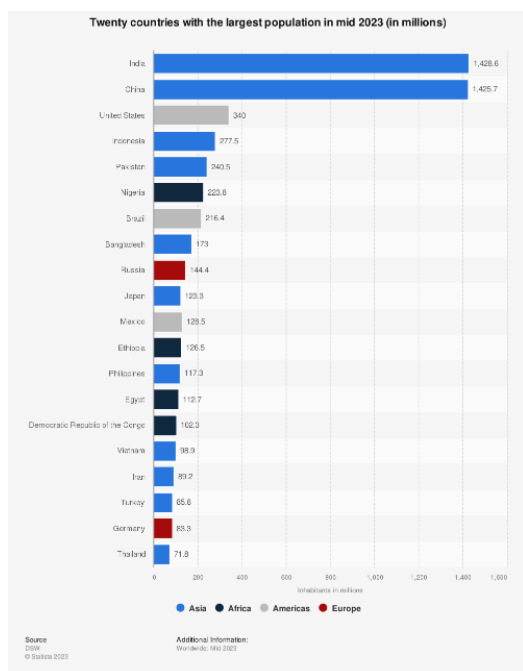


Figure 3.0: Twenty countries with largest population in 2023. Source, Statista

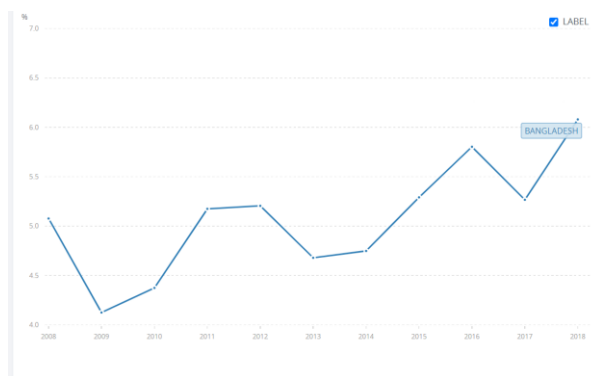


Figure 3.1: Bangladesh GDP growth rate 2008-2018, World Bank

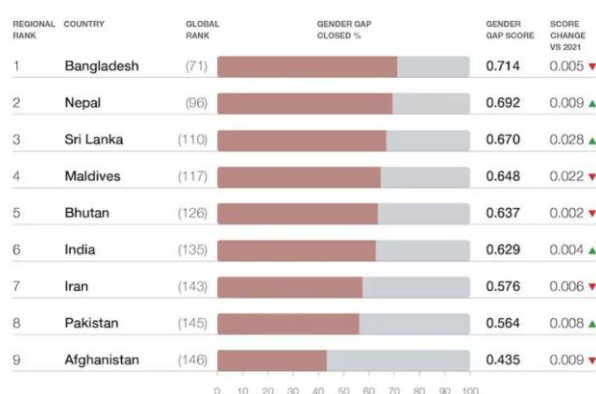


Figure 3.3: Global gender gap index 2022, Southeast Asia, World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2022

4. Sustainable development issues

According to the United Nations, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, is a "shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future" which cuts across economic, environmental, social and governance pillars and aims to meet the needs of people today without undermining the capabilities of future generations to meet their needs. With the goal of transitioning from Least Developed Country (LDC) status by 2026 and achieve the SDGs, Bangladesh faces some key challenges.

4.1 Poverty and inequality

Defined by the World Bank as "the inability to attain a minimal standard of living" (World Bank, 1990), poverty is typically categorized as a lack of "means" in relation to "needs" or a lack of "means" in relation to "means" (Sen, 1999). According to Islam et al (2020) despite

improvements in recent years. reduction in poverty and inequality represents a serious challenge for Bangladesh. In addition to its commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals, it adopted its 'Vision-2021' to reduce the rate of poverty from 25% to 15% by 2021 as well as the Five-Year Plan 2016–2022 to reach average real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth of 7.4%. As noted in the World Bank Bangladesh development report 2023, sustained economic growth has led to real reductions in poverty improving access to education, sanitation, and electricity, reducing the rate of infant mortality, narrowing the inequality gap in rural areas and lifting 5.4 million people out of extreme poverty. However, there are still economic issues for Bangladesh as the report notes, which relate to balance of payments (BoP) deficit, elevated commodity prices, and rising inflationary pressure with a sharp decline in foreign exchange (FX) reserves.

4.2 Climate change and environmental degradation

Listed as the seventh country in the Global Climate Risk Index 2021 and as one of the leading countries in the weather, water, and climate changes disasters between 1970 and 2019 as illustrated in Figure 4.0, Bangladesh is susceptible to extreme natural and climatic events given its location and climate and therefore is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. According to the World Bank's Country Climate and Development Report for Bangladesh 2022, although Bangladesh's economic growth has been supported by significant investment in climate resilience and disasters preparedness with the development of a Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan in 2009, its development trajectory is at risk with the potential for very poor outcomes for socially disadvantaged communities if managed ineffectively. The World Bank estimate that the impact of cyclones already cost Bangladesh in the region of \$1 billion annually and predict that the cost of environmental degradation and natural disasters will increase over time. By 2050, it is forecasted that as much as one-third of agricultural GDP which accounts for around 50% of employment may be lost due to climatic variations and extreme events.

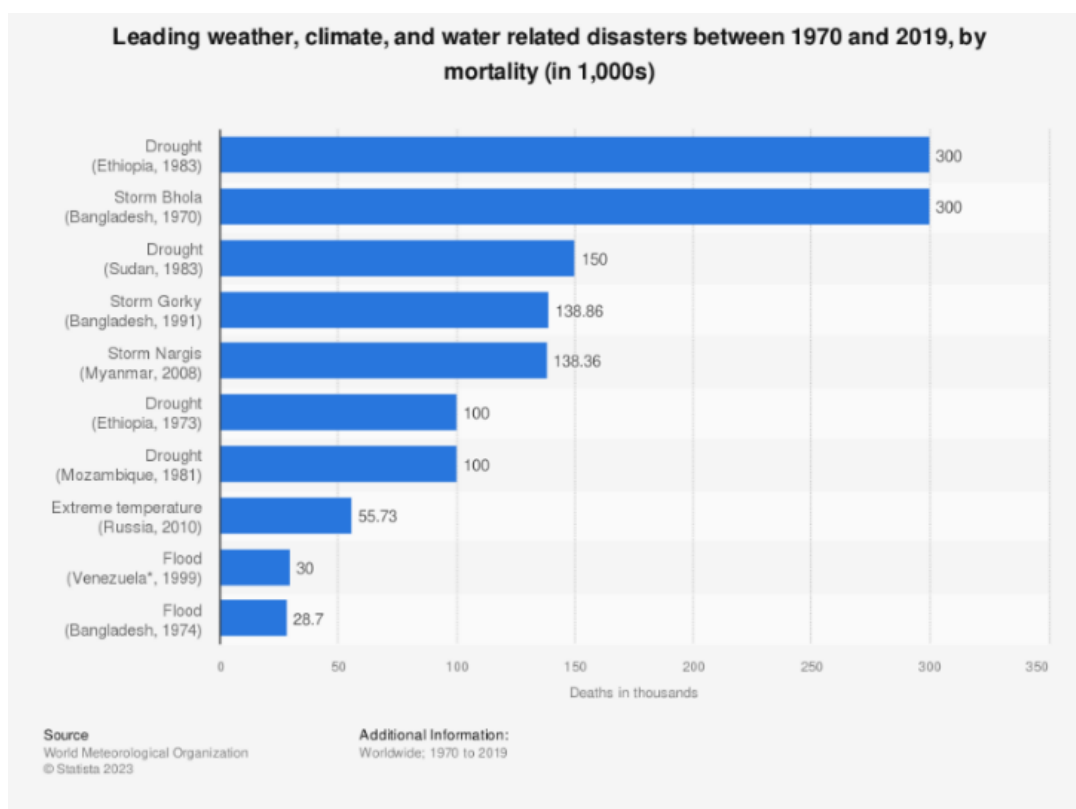


Figure 4.0: Leading weather, water, and climate changes disasters between 1970 and 2019 by mortality, Statista

4.3 Access to healthcare and education

As Islam et al (2020) notes, poor communities in Bangladesh have limited access to the benefits of development with Khan et al. (2011) noting that the poorest 20% of women are almost three times less likely to have received antenatal care (ANC) and six times less likely to have skilled assistance at birth than their wealthier counterparts. Furthermore, Ahmed et al. (2015) suggest that the health workforce is unequally distributed with secondary and tertiary hospitals, pharmacies and health workers located in urban areas although 65% of the population lives in rural areas and urban bias is a significant issue. For Islam et al (2020), education is a strong indicator of poverty and inequality with poor education leading to lower incomes which itself leads to poor education. In Bangladesh in 2010, the literacy rates in rural areas are low at 56.90% and 51.39%, for men and women respectively, compared to 70.84% and 65.95% for urban areas in 2011 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2010). Al-Samarai (2008) argue, inequality in education at the primary level in Bangladesh is a consequence of

poor governance; bias in the decision-making process and weaknesses in institutions which favour populations that are not in poverty, Goetz and Jenkins (2022). Ahmed (2021) discusses how sustainable development aspirations are heavily impacted by unequal opportunities in access to education for disadvantaged communities, disparities between male-female, rural-urban populations, regions, literacy rates, low teacher-student ratio as well as insufficient public spending as a percentage of GDP.

5. Challenges of implementation

As Uddin and Uddin (2018) suggest, the SDGs have been realised as both an ambition and a challenge for countries globally and this necessitates not only transformational change in Bangladesh but the need for a more durable economy and greater equality.

5.1 Governance and institutions

Poverty and social inequality in Bangladesh is increasing with Afsar (2010) suggesting that weak governance in the form of clientelist practice is the main driver of gross inequity across socio-economic groups with huge disparities between the poorest and wealthiest which negatively impacts on progress. According to Islam et al (2020), Barkat (2004) suggest that Bangladesh is subject to ongoing economic criminalisation as the result of a political economy which marginalises the poor and problems with governance noting that the total “khas” land (agricultural and non-agricultural) has been obtained by politically influential people or by illegal means with limited land rights for women or religious and ethnic minorities.

5.2 Lack of infrastructures, resources and environmental education

According to Khatun & Saadat (2021), the government of Bangladesh developed new institutional arrangements to facilitating effective localisation and implementation of the SDGs in Bangladesh engaging a principal coordinator for SDG Affairs and an SDG working team (Rahman et al, 2020) as well as committees at the subnational level- divisional, district and sub-district level (Government of Bangladesh, 2020). Furthermore, key government projects and programmes related to SDG indicators have been mapped as seen in Table 5.0.

However, Bangladesh is underperforming in terms of achieving SDG 14.4.1 and SDG 16.1.1, with limited government involvement at the project level undermining efficiency. The importance of the localisation of the SDGs is recognised and requires reinforcing the capacity of local governments with a focus on identifying local priorities and using locally led knowledge resources to develop regional solutions (Khatun, et al., 2020) as national solutions often do not meet regional needs. Effective utilisation of resources, knowledge sharing and partnerships, pose regional challenges for the localisation of the SDGs in Bangladesh which requires a strong decentralised local governance structure.

Table 5.0: SDG implementation and programmes of Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh by indicator

SDG indicator	Ongoing projects and programmes	New projects and programmes up to 2020	Projects and programmes for the period 2021-2030
1.1.1	24	20	15
2.1.1	47	44	49
3.1.1	17	14	4
4.1.1	16	12	31
5.3.1	4	3	0
6.2.1	9	4	6
7.1.1	44 ^G , 21 ^T , 43 ^D	25 ^G , 11 ^T , 22 ^D	20 ^G , 1 ^T , 27 ^D
8.1.1	56	2	6
9.2.1	39	53	23
10.1.1	3	4	2
11.1.1	24	13	0
12.2.2	6	6	0
13.1.1	55	54	27
14.4.1	3	4	2
15.1.1	10	7	6
16.1.1	1	1	1
17.1.1	17	5	3

5.3 Urbanisation and population

As a densely populated country, sustainable urban development for Bangladesh which addresses urbanisation and population growth faces significant challenges related to overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, and environmental degradation which is compounded a lack of methodology and organisation. The population growth is steadily increasing as indicated in Figure 5.0 as is the population density as in Figure 5.1 and the rapid increase in the rate of urbanisation as illustrated in Figure 5.2 has exceeded that of infrastructure and services which has negatively impacted on the availability of resources and living conditions. Consequently, Bangladesh is increasingly unable to meet public needs in terms of transportation, water supply and sanitation which represents significant challenges to sustainable development.

Furthermore, informal accommodation and slums also lack basic services and facilities as well as education or healthcare and developing these areas to improve services and living conditions is fraught with difficulties due to resistance from local communities, lack of capacity and issues around land ownership. In addition, increasing urbanisation has been responsible for soil sealing, deforestation, a decrease in biodiversity as well as water and air pollution and therefore pollution control measures as well as management is necessary in urban areas to mitigate against further environmental impacts. The lack of financial resources represents further challenges as adequate training, knowledge, expertise, and governance to manage, support and implement these projects is often lacking.

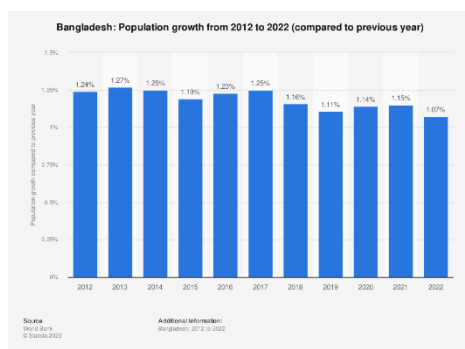


Figure 5.0: Population growth of Bangladesh from 2012 to 2022 compared with previous year, Statista

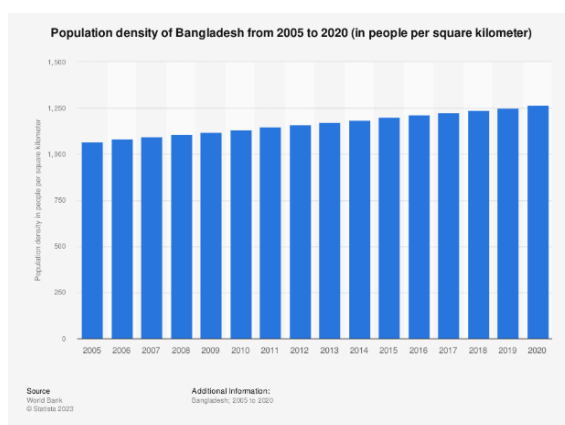


Figure 5.1: Population density of Bangladesh from 2005 to 2020 (in people per square kilometre), Statista

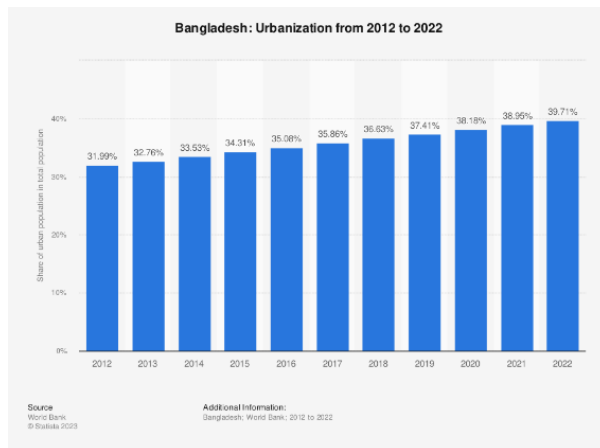


Figure 5.2: Urbanisation from 2012 to 2022, Statista

6. Conclusions and recommendations

Given the many challenges that face Bangladesh, a number of approaches can be considered to improve sustainable development and achieve the 2030 agenda.

1. People centric (climate-smart spatial development)

Grass roots locally led development which integrates region specific solutions is crucial particularly in communities that are vulnerable to multiple challenges. Investment in education and public services as well as water and waste management supported by the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100 will support long-term sustainable development of the country's delta and river systems and land resources. (World Bank's Country Climate and Development Report for Bangladesh 2022)

2. Decarbonisation

Although, Bangladesh's GHG global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions are low, the World Bank country report 2023 analysis suggests that the 2021 Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) can be exceeded without undermining development goals. Furthermore, it is estimated that the introduction of policies that mitigate air pollution and emissions can reduce deaths from pollution by 1 million by 2030 as well as overall energy costs. This can be supported by the removal of energy subsidies for inefficient industries and will encourage foreign investment and global compositeness. (World Bank's Country Climate and Development Report for Bangladesh 2022)

3. Empowering local government

A key issue for Bangladesh is to develop institutional capacity to deliver efficient climate change policies and programs through empowering local governments. Collaboration with civil society organisations and NGOs to deliver and monitor climate change programs can be effective from a triple nexus perspective, with potential for private sector financing to contribute up to 0.2 percent of GDP (equivalent to \$1 billion) by 2025. The World Bank argue that increased domestic and foreign involvement, such as climate-smart agriculture and renewable energy, is possible. (World Bank's Country Climate and Development Report for Bangladesh 2022).

4. Financing

According to the United Nations Bangladesh, while the country has made significant progress in terms of poverty reduction, human development, and economic growth in recent years and aims to transition from Least Developed Country (LDC) status by 2026 and reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, financing the SDGs is a critical issue for Bangladesh. These challenges require financing solutions so such as the Financing Framework (INFF) which assist governments in developing policy instruments and strategies to effectively manage resources in alignment with the SDGs. Several UN agencies in partnership with local government are working on redeveloping financial assessments mapped against the necessary investments to provide concrete and robust pathways to achieve the 2030 agenda particularly in relation to goals for renewable energy, clean water and sanitation and climate change. To ensure a successful implementation, effective use of resources and a solid actionable pathway to achieving the SDGs is crucial. It is important that a governance mechanism is established in Bangladesh to coordinate the INFF process across government, agencies and stakeholders including a comprehensive monitoring, evaluation, and reporting system as well as awareness raising initiatives among the community and policymakers.

7. References

Ahmed, S. M., Alam, B. B., Anwar, I., Begum, T., & Huque, R. (2015). Bangladesh Health System Review. *Health Systems in Transition*, 5(3), 1–186

Ahmed, M. M, Inequality of opportunity in education and sustainable development: The case of Bangladesh (August 5, 2021)

Al-Samarai, S. (2008). Governance and Education Inequality in Bangladesh.

Afsar, R. (2010). Poverty, Inequality and the challenges of pro-poor governance in Bangladesh. *Journal of South Asian Development*.

Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). (2010). Bangladesh Household Income and expenditure Survey. Dhaka: BBS, Bangladesh Planning Commission.

Barkat, A. (2004). Poverty and Access to Land in South Asia: Bangladesh Country Study. National Resources Institute, University of Greenwich, UK

Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP) 2009, Economic Relations Division, Ministry of Finance, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Climate Vulnerability Index Risk, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) , Bangladesh 2021

Goetz A., Jenkins R., Voice, Accountability and Human Development: The Emergence of a New Agenda, 2022 United Nations Development Programme.

Islam, M. R., Khan, N. A., Poverty and Social Inequality: Bangladesh Experience (2020), Building Sustainable Communities Civil Society Response in South Asia (pp.425-451) Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan

Khan, M. M. H., Krämer, A., Khandoker, A., Prüfer-Krämer, L., & Islam, A. (2011). Trends in Sociodemographic and Health-Related Indicators in Bangladesh, 1993–2007: Will Inequities Persist? Bulletin of the World Health Organisation

Kashem, M., Faroque, M. 2013, A Country Scenarios of food security and governance in Bangladesh, 2013, Journal of Science Foundation

Khatun, F., Saadat, S. Y. (2021), Implementation of the SDGs in Bangladesh: Domestic challenges and regional considerations United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP).

Mojid, M., A., Climate change-induced challenges to sustainable development in Bangladesh, (2019) IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science, Volume 423, The 4th International Conference on Climate Change 2019 (The 4th ICC 2019) 18–19 November 2019

Nasreen. M., Hossain K., M., Kundu. D. K. (2006) Bangladesh Journal of Sociology, 2006, The Interrelationship between poverty, environment and sustainable development in Bangladesh: An Overview.

Rahman, Khan, & Sadique, 2020, Implementation of the SDGs in Bangladesh: Domestic challenges and regional considerations

Sadekin, N., Muhibullah, M., Mahmudul Alam, M., 2022, Global Economic Change and Inequality (2021). Walter Leal Filho et al. (eds), Reduced Inequalities: Encyclopedia of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Springer.

Sen, A. Development as Freedom, 1999, Oxford University Press, Introduction

Uddin, M. J., Uddin, M. N., 2018 Overview of the challenges to achieve sustainable development goals in Bangladesh. The International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Invention 5(02): 4453-4460, 2018. Available at: United Nations, United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Integrated National Financing Frameworks <https://financing.desa.un.org/what-we-do/other/integrated-national-financing-frameworks>

World Development Report 1990, World Bank, Poverty. New York: Oxford University Press.

World Bank Development Report, Bangladesh Development Update October 2023,

Figures

Twenty countries with the largest population, Statista

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/262879/countries-with-the-largest-population>

Bangladesh GDP growth rate 2008-2018, World Bank

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.KD.ZG?end=2018&locations=BD&start=2008&view=chart>

Global gender gap index 2022, World Economic Forum 2022

<https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2022/in-full>

Leading weather, water, and climate changes disasters between 1970 and 2019 by mortality, Statista

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1267256/biggest-climate-disasters-by-deaths>

Population growth of Bangladesh from 2012 to 2022 compared with previous year, Statista

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/268715/population-growth-in-bangladesh-1990-2008>

Population density of Bangladesh from 2005 to 2020 (in people per square kilometre), Statista

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/778381/bangladesh-population-density/>

Bangladesh: Urbanisation from 2012 to 2022, Statista

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/455782/urbanization-in-bangladesh/>